

SCIENCE & EDUCATION Impact

Benefits From the USDA/Land-Grant Partnership

Parenting With Finesse

Everybody learns on the job.

Being a parent today is a challenge: financial pressures, the search for quality child care, and divorce all may complicate life. Every 26 seconds, a teenager gets pregnant, and every 56 seconds, another gives birth. Teen pregnancy adds to the U.S. welfare burden and leads to child abuse and crime. Low-birthweight babies cost taxpayers an average of \$60,000 in first-year hospital costs. Whether reaching out to at-risk families, to families of divorce, or to parents of newborns, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Land-Grant institutions can provide education and support.

Payoff

- **News for new parents.** New parents may not have the time or the initiative to seek out parenting information. Monthly newsletters published by **Idaho**, **New Mexico**, and **Wisconsin** bring this information directly to parents. Distributed with the help of more than 50 hospitals, clubs, and other organizations, Wisconsin's newsletter reached 40,000 families last year and has reached a total of 170,000 since the project began. Parents said that reading the newsletter caused them to give their babies more stimulation, to hug and talk to them more, and to be less angry when the babies were difficult. **New Mexico's** newsletter reached 25,000 parents, and **Idaho's** newsletter, translated into Spanish, was distributed to every **Idaho** county and to 25 other states.
- **Helping young mothers cope, and decreasing repeat pregnancies.** Adolescent mothers are at higher risk for abusing their children than older mothers. A **Mis-souri** Extension program reduced child-abuse risk through a three-year program of mentoring and support. Compared to a group of young mothers not enrolled in the program, participating moms showed fewer repeat pregnancies, better educational outcomes, and less life stress. A **Mississippi** program, Bright Futures, reached 350 families in one county and lowered the repeat pregnancy rate there from 60 percent to 2 percent.

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- **Parents after divorce.** Divorce can hurt children, but it doesn't always have to. Research shows that children of divorced parents get sick and are in trouble more often, make lower grades, and have more trouble making friends. But a child who has a good relationship with both parents can sidestep problems. A **Minnesota** program, Parents Forever, can help. Piloted in eight counties last year, it has been selected to be part of a mandated course for divorcing couples who can't agree on the future care of their children. A similar program offered by **Washington State** also is mandated for divorcing parents in two counties. One participant said, "I learned not to use my child against my ex-husband."
- **Parenting 101.** While children come with no instruction manuals, Land-Grant universities can help parents excel in this all-important role. **Kansas State's** program, Responsive Discipline: Effective Tools for Parents, offers alternatives to physical punishment and methods to help parents respond more effectively to misbehavior. Kansas State reached more than 3,500 parents directly through workshops and another 4,000 through a self-study program. About 98 percent of participants said they learned more about discipline, and 75 percent of those who began the program with moderate confidence said they learned new options for dealing with problem behavior. **Ohio State** reached 29,300 parents with its program, and about 90 percent reported that the information will improve their parenting. Said one Defiance County, Ohio, parent, "I always thought I had to have all the answers. When I couldn't help my family, I lost my self-esteem. You gave it back to me, and now my family is back on track." Programs also are ongoing in **Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas.**
- **By the book.** A program in **Kansas** will help raise a generation of readers. Targeted to parents of newborns and young children, the Raise a Reader Program includes ideas on instilling reading habits at an early age and information about how to choose books. More than 3,000 parents were reached, with 93 percent saying they were more likely to read to their children as a result.
- **Better food, bigger babies.** Nutrition programs for pregnant women are reducing the numbers of low-birthweight and preterm babies, resulting in healthier infants and lower hospital and medical costs. **Purdue's** program reached 1,600 pregnant adolescents with information on adequate weight gain during pregnancy, nutritious food choices, and health consequences of substance abuse for mother and child. Participants delivered fewer low-birthweight babies than nonparticipants: 6.5 percent versus 10 percent. Low-birthweight babies who were born to participants spent less time in the hospital—10 days versus 30 days. Only two neonatal deaths were recorded out of 990 births—about half the state average. One 15-year-old said, "The best thing about this program was the information. I quit smoking because of it." A prenatal class in DeKalb County, **Georgia**, reduced the number of low-birthweight babies from 9.8 percent to 2 percent. Participants in a program offered by **Arkansas** delivered babies who weighed 6.5 pounds on average, versus 5.8 pounds for nonparticipants' babies. **Nebraska** offers a similar program in which 85 percent of teen participants have delivered normal birthweight babies.
- **Beta breast milk.** **Maryland** researchers are looking at ways in which beta-carotene vitamin supplements enhance nursing mothers' immune systems and are investigating whether this immunity is passed on to their babies through breastfeeding. Data generated by the research will help doctors make vitamin recommendations to enhance the health of new mothers and their babies.



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